A Fable

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BEFORE THE DAYS of voyagers and conquistadors, before the days of feudal kings or days of plebe and senator; before even the days of Moses and the pharaohs; before all these days were times when it is said gods walked, men lived in the woods, and giants and giant things were not unknown.

A youthful giant called Usa lived then in his own small land. He was not alone there, for normal men lived scattered through all the woodlands. In his bigness and strength he liked to feel as their lord, and as the lord of the land. He liked at the end of a day to lean against a great oak tree with the breeze in his face, contentedly surveying his small world—forests and meadows, cattle, flocks of sheep, and all the wild beasts. Often then he would bellow toward the woodlands, “Come out, you people—see what we are going to do tonight”. Most of them always came. A few would come running up to lean carelessly against his ankle, as if to show their fellows, “See what close friends I am with the great Usa!” Many came walking out slowly, and many slunk along reluctantly in the rear, muttering and kicking small stones. One night he would let the children tumble in his beard, the next he would stamp and roar at the fishermen for going to the sea instead of to the lakes as he had ordered. One night he might strut about, testing his strength against the hugest rocks, grunting and sweating and heaving for the smiles of the people, and on another night he might rumble a lullaby to a colicky baby as he rocked it in his rough palm, or swagger among the people doling out gold and food and clothing, or gruntingly demonstrate a fast new way to plow the fields.

The people looked and admired and muttered and cursed. “A great oaf,” said a bitter one, “not as wise even as most of us.” “Yes,” said another, “Usa is our pain but
yet our life—can it be another way? It was so determined from the time of his birth and childhood. Anyone could see he could never take an ordinary place in this world.” And even the surly ones admitted, “Tied to a giant with what seems a noose and yet our umbilical cord—we cannot solve it.”

Usa claimed the other creatures, too. He would tramp about the land, inspecting here and there, living in the open, and echoing his laughs and shouts across the hills. One day he awoke from a nap on the meadow sun, scratched, belched contentedly and began to gather up his cloak and sandals. Suddenly the calm of the day fled before frantic muffled bellowing and stamping noises within the forest. Usa hurried toward it, guided this way and that by the echoing sounds. Finally he peered down into a hidden, murkey glade, and stopped. The calf—for it was a calf there in the gloom—turned its gaze upward. It was a great red calf, scarcely dry yet from its birth, yet strength showed in every line and muscle, and its gaze, too, was strong and steady and cold as it fell upon Usa. Usa peered closer, for he saw that the calf had somehow been born with sharp cruel horns already formed, and then gasped—a rush of wind that set the leaves to fluttering. At the calf’s feet was its mother, crushed and still bleeding. “Oh God!” he exclaimed. “The calf’s own horns are bloody and dripping!” It stepped backward, then crashed away into the gloom.

Usa told the people of the scene. “It was both curious and horrible,” he said. “But keep watch for the corpse of the calf, for having killed its own dam, it will surely die without a protector in these wilds.” And gradually the memory began to leave him.

But some of the people continued to speak of it. They had heard strange tales of the savage scarred old bull, god of vengeance and wrath, who had come to walk the earth among mortal cattle for a day, and of a fierce wild mating, deep in the forest, with a great strong gentle cow of the meadows.

Neither did Usa completely forget it, for here and there he saw the red bull calf, sharp-horned and big as an ox be-
fore its first year. And the people told him of whole wolf-packs dead, torn by "some fearful pairs of horns". The young bull's red shoulders now crushed over small trees as he walked. The giant Usa often came across the torn trail of the bull, or glimpsed him; and sometimes Usa's brow would furrow in thought.

This was the beginning of the anxious years in the little land, for the bull continued to grow; and his horns to thicken and lengthen. A murmur ran fitfully among the people now. "We have known anxious times before, and Usa has been our protector. Against the ocean-beasts we fought with him; his great strength and bravery protected our land. He fought beside us and overcame the fierce spearmen from behind the mountains. His labors fed us in the famine. He is young and strong—he killed the seven-armed giant who would have held the rain clouds back, causing us to thirst to death. But what of the bull—he doesn't tremble at the sight of Usa as did the other enemies. His horns and muscles grow still stronger. What is one, to the other?" And the people, with wisdom unknown to themselves, began to call the bull Ussra—"Usa's fate".

One day Usa walked along a path, and suddenly he encountered the bull. They regarded each other tensely until Usa drew himself up and squared his shoulders. Then finally the bull tossed his head, snorted, and deliberately pushed his red bulk off through the woods. Usa stood thoughtfully, grimaced to himself, and finally stepped into the woods to pick up a branch from the ground and trim it as a light club. And from this time on the land knew not only anxious times but bitterness and fear. "Usa carries a stick now—the great, great Usa. Where is his bravery?" said some. "He walks no more hesitantly than before," said others. "He still maintains our land and lives." The old wise ones said, "It is the nature of the bull; his horns will no more stop growing than the hairs on our heads. Usa sees the bull's horns, and the bull sees Usa's stick. They know there is no strongest between them."

Still the bull grew, and he began to command his own men. Some were drawn to his strength and some followed
only in fear of the heavy horns. "I have seen men torn and bloody, deep in the woods," the men whispered. "Not torn by hands or spears, but by horns and hooves." Usa saw them too, and roared in the evenings, "Don't fear, people. Together we have nothing to fear! And see here, I now carry the trunk of a young pine tree for my weapon! Now let us have a round of singing, as we used to do!" But a bold one cried, "Then if we have nothing to fear, let us rid ourselves of this awful bull and his followers who make our lives into shivering days and nights!" Usa looked up and roared, "And would you battle half of yourselves to death, not even knowing if you could win? I said we are in no danger from him while we stay united and while I have my club! Now, we are going to sing loudly, as we used to!"

They sang; loudly even, as they caught up some of the old spirit. But there came a great coughing, rumbling bull's bellow from afar off, ringing over and through the last notes of the song, and the people darted back to the forest with chilled souls. Even Usa leaned back against the hillside, eyes closed, for awhile. The next day he cut and trimmed the thickest, straightest, tallest oak in his forest, and from that time he carried it always. He still walked without hesitation, but he no longer slept and scratched his belly in the meadow, in the sun.

Ussra matured, a giant among bulls as Usa was a giant among men. More and more the ground about the sunny central meadow shook beneath their tread as they strode faster and faster through the forest, each now with their men flitting along in the huge shadows almost as if attached to the giants with nooses, or umbilical cords. Never stopping was the strengthening of the horns and the shaping of the club. "Now it cannot stop," sobbed one of the old wise ones, "neither the horns' growing while the club is gripped, nor the club deadlier while the horns grow."

Suddenly, unexpectedly the restless wandering led each, and his, onto the golden meadow. Ussra trotted back and forth, faster and more nervously, the great gleaming horns seeming to loom larger with each shake of the grizzled red head. Usa’s heart beat faster and harder until the meadow
shook to it as to the bull’s pawing, and Usa wrenched up a huge black boulder and fixed it to his club. The whole land vibrated to the power of the breathing and stamping and hearts of the giants.

Then suddenly the wise one, who had sobbed, struck his foot upon a stone and cried in pain. His cry was as lightning, a massive spark which ignited the center of the meadow to a seething piece of blind, struggling flesh where before two muttering, restless groups had stood. Over it, disregarding it, slowly the two giants’ eyes met, and as the thunder following the lightning they were together, met in the center of the meadow in a shock that cleaved that land along their charging, intercepting paths of fate. It lasted not a full second. The frightful horn was pierced through dead Usa’s breast while the huge black boulder lay in the broken red head of Ussra. The gore of their dying drenched the air and grass and all the woods around, as if a mighty fire raged. The struggling people disappeared into the darkened chasm as if sucked by a great mouth.

The sheep huddled under the trees and the squirrels in their dens, as if for a storm to stop and dust to settle, but there was no dust. They would come out later, to graze and play in the sun, on the edge of the meadow.

Larry Syndergaard, Ag. Sr.

Volunteer

I STOOD THERE looking up at the third pole. The straps of the spikes squeezed my legs, giving me a sense of strength in their tightness.

Should I be sensible or should I show the stuff I was made of? Chances are if I show what I’m made of, I’ll show it splattered all over the ground.

I took a hitch in the heavy belt, kicked my spikes against the pole for luck and dug the first iron in, on my way up the sixty-foot pole. I took my time, since I wasn’t a pro at